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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RABAT 000623

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [EAID](#) [KMPI](#) [PREL](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: FREEDOM OF PRESS IN MOROCCO: BATTERED BUT NOT
BROKEN

REF: A. RABAT 0570
[1](#)B. RABAT 0493
[1](#)C. ALGIERS 0685

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) A rash of incidents over the past month have taken a toll on Morocco's reputation for relative press freedom. These incidents have included several cases of police harassment or abuse of journalists, Government of Morocco (GOM) efforts to restrict the operations of foreign news agencies in Morocco, and a court ruling ordering a newspaper to cease publishing closed-door human rights testimonies dating back several years. While most of this likely originates from signals from the palace and security establishment, at least some of the pushback can probably be traced to Prime Minister El Fassi's Istiqlal party. These efforts have ironically revealed how much the culture of press freedom has taken hold in Morocco, as well as the limits of government censorship in the electronic age. Moroccan independent newspapers, international satellite networks and local citizen journalists have all carefully reported on the attacks on press freedom, and harshly criticized the GOM for its restrictive measures, echoing international condemnation, which is also freely available here. End summary.

Reporters without Borders Sounds the Alarm

[1](#)2. (U) On June 18, Reporters without Borders (RWB) issued a press release stating, &What is left of press freedom in Morocco? The first six months of 2008 have been marked by an avalanche of trials and repressive judicial and administrative decisions. At the same time, promises by Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi's government to reform the press law have still not materialized. No bill has yet been submitted to the chamber of deputies.⁸ RWB documented in the press release several incidents in 2008 that suggest a serious backsliding in press freedom in Morocco. The most important examples are outlined below.

Al Jazeera in Sidi Ifni

[1](#)3. (U) On June 14, the Government of Morocco (GOM) stripped Al Jazeera Rabat bureau chief Hassan al-Rachidi of his press accreditation and charged him with violating a rarely applied article of the Moroccan press code. Rachidi faces up to one year in prison and a fine of 100,000 Moroccan dirhams (around

USD 13,500). The GOM accused Rachidi of conspiring to spread false information after Al Jazeera reported that up to ten people had died in June 7 disorders in the southern fishing village of Sidi Ifni, in the face of government denials, and, as best as we could eventually determine, the truth (Ref A). Communications Minister and Government Spokesman Khalid Naciri immediately called on Al Jazeera to issue a public apology.

14. (U) Rachidi and Al Jazeera demurred and protested the charges, insisting that the network had gotten its information from sources (it cited) on the ground and that it had broadcast the Interior Ministry's denial of fatalities immediately upon its release. Moreover, Rachidi noted, many other national and international media outlets (including Reuters, BBC, AP, and AFP) had broadcast similar reports without facing such legal action.

15. (U) Most Moroccan official and independent media condemned Al Jazeera for the Sidi Ifni reports, widely accusing the network of having breached journalistic ethics and acted irresponsibly. However, few have supported the GOM decision to charge Rachidi. International press freedom watchdog groups (including RWB and Human Rights Watch) have been vocal in defending Al Jazeera, supported by some local independent newspapers, who have argued that the channel behaved ethically by citing its sources, even if the information initially reported ended up being incorrect.

16. (U) These events occurred shortly after a GOM decision to suspend Al Jazeera's license to broadcast its nightly Maghreb news bulletin from Rabat (Ref B), leading many

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observers to conclude that the GOM planned to kick Al Jazeera out of Morocco. Naciri publicly responded that the GOM had no intention of closing Al Jazeera's Rabat bureau. He stated that the GOM brought charges against Al Jazeera because it was the first to report the alleged deaths, while other channels relied on Al Jazeera for their stories. He added that others had promptly corrected the record, while Al Jazeera stubbornly continued to report incorrect information.

Human Rights Leader Impedes Transparency

17. (U) On June 19, a Casablanca court ordered Al Jarida Al Oula, a recently-launched Arabic-language daily, to cease publishing transcripts of testimonies senior Moroccan officials made several years ago before the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER), a body created to investigate alleged human rights violations that occurred before 1999. The court demanded that Al Jarida Al Oula return all unpublished documents and imposed a MAD 1,000 fine on the newspaper for every day it ignored the order. The ruling came in response to a suit filed against the newspaper by Amhed Herzenni, chairman of the Consultative Council for Human Rights (CCDH), the organization charged with following up on IER recommendations. Herzenni was reportedly especially concerned about publication of testimony by current CORCAS head Kalihenna Ould Errachid about severe human rights abuses in Western Sahara during the Hassan II era -- a major personal and political embarrassment for Errachid. Herzenni claimed in his suit that Al Jarida Al Oula had published confidential documents.

18. (U) The director of Al Jarida Al Oula, Ali Anouzla, condemned the decision as a blow to press freedom, saying that CCDH was depriving Moroccans of their right to be informed about an issue concerning the collective memory of the people.⁸ Several independent newspapers strongly supported Anouzla, arguing that the documents in question were not governmental and thus were not protected by state secret laws, and that Al Jarida Al Oula was indeed providing a public service by publishing them. Independent

French-language daily Le Soir opined, &If they can pay daily the MAD 1,000 in question, Ali Anouzla and his colleagues should continue to publish these testimonies that belong in the end to all Moroccans. The fine will be transformed into a sort of tax for historical truth that our brothers would pay in (good conscience).⁸

Photographer Documenting Police Abuses
Inadvertently Sparks Al-Qaeda Fatwa

¶9. (U) On June 16, Karim Selmaoui, a photographer for Arabic-language daily Al Massae, was questioned by police for over three hours about a photograph he took in late May depicting a police officer apparently striking a young mother while she held a baby in her arms. The photo was taken during a demonstration by family members of Salafist prisoners. The photo received wide play in the foreign press and eventually made its way onto jihadist websites, after which the police officer pictured began to receive death threats from terrorist organizations, including a formal fatwa issued by Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Ref C). The police questioned Selmaoui on his intentions in publishing the photo, asking whether he had relations with jihadist sites and had provided them with the photograph. (He denied any such ties.) Al Massae and other local newspapers reported widely on the incident, including Selmaoui's claim that one investigator had justified the questioning by saying, "One can live without the press, but one cannot live without being safe."⁸

Police Abuse of Journalists
Becoming Disturbingly Common

¶10. (U) Selmaoui's interrogation came one week after he was detained for several hours by the police along with another journalist, Fouad Madani, while both were attempting to report on the Sidi Ifni disturbances. According to Selmaoui, the police seized their mobile telephones and cameras, accusing them of plotting against the authorities and inciting the local population to protest. Selmaoui and Madani told local newspapers that the police threatened them and their families with torture and sexual abuse as well.

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¶11. (SBU) In an incident later that week, police officers prevented journalists with the Tiznit Press Club from taking photographs of a rally of jobless youth in front of the governor's office in Tiznit. As was the case in previous Tiznit protests, the demonstration turned violent, and several of the protestors were injured. The chairman of the Tiznit Press Club was arrested, along with another reporter who refused to turn his camera over to the police. In yet another incident in June, a Spanish photographer working for Reuters was severely beaten by the police while covering a demonstration of unemployed university graduates in front of Parliament. According to an eyewitness account by another Spanish journalist, policemen seized and tore up the photographer's press credentials while continuing to beat him.

Parliament Makes Abortive Effort
To Impose Journalist Code of Conduct⁸

¶12. (U) The local press has also reported that parliamentary officials recently attempted to impose new restrictive measures on journalists wishing to cover parliamentary activities. Parliament staff demanded that media outlets apply for accreditation to cover these activities, and that they appoint only one staff member to cover parliament on a

regular basis. To obtain the accreditation, journalists would have had to sign a &commitment8 to cover parliamentary activities in &an objective, balanced, and responsible way,8 avoiding &all sorts of sensationalism, public exposure, defamation and associating MPs by name to issues and events.8 Parliament leadership reportedly backed down on this proposal in the face of widespread criticism in the press.

Spanish Journalists Under the Gun

¶13. (C) Spanish journalists, who comprise the single largest contingent of foreign journalists in Morocco, have told us they have experienced increased harassment by the GOM in recent months. One Spanish television journalist told IO that the GOM had ordered on spurious grounds the closure of the Moroccan-Spanish company that uploaded all television footage for the Morocco-based bureaus of three Spanish television stations. The GOM had provided a reprieve of the decision through July, but if the company is indeed forced to shut down, all three Spanish television stations will be unable to report from Morocco and will likely leave. The journalist felt strongly that Spanish journalists in general, and these television stations in particular, were being targeted for their perceived sympathy with the Polisario,s perspective on the Western Sahara conflict. The journalist also reported that his residence and office had been ransacked recently but that nothing of monetary value was taken, strongly suggesting harassment by local authorities. Spanish diplomats confirm some harassment but indicate that they have not themselves taken it up with the GOM.

The Press Pushes Back

¶14. (SBU) These incidents have not left the fourth estate defenseless; the GOM has exposed itself to ridicule and harsh criticism from the local independent press for every restrictive action it has taken. Al Jazeera, still the most popular television station in Morocco (including with most officials), has documented in gross detail its local travails for the Moroccan and international television audience. Moreover, the Internet is largely unrestricted in Morocco, and thus is fertile ground for blogging and other forms of citizen journalism. Within hours of the police riots in Sidi Ifni, locals had already posted video footage of the events on YouTube and shared it with the world, clearly documenting an out-of-control police response, even if no deaths resulted.

Comment

¶15. (C) Although the RWB press release is somewhat alarmist in tone, it is difficult to argue with its basic premise: 2008 has witnessed a clear and disturbing trend of abuse of, and pressure on, the media in Morocco. Cases of impingement

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on press freedom over the previous few years were rarer and easier to explain; by contrast, most recent examples appear to be unadulterated efforts to promote self-censorship. It is likely that the security establishment and the palace are behind some of the tightening, which parallels the recent shrinking of political space afforded opposition politicians, including the PJD. GOM sensitivity to growing social discontent over rising prices most likely plays a major role in this trend. However, it also appears clear that the Istiqlal party, and particularly its chief, Prime Minister El Fassi, are hostile to freedom of expression. Direct Istiqlal involvement is hard to pin down, but Istiqlal is behind recent efforts to retable a draft law regulating polling that is even more restrictive than one tabled and shelved by the

GOM last year. Thus, while there may be no official policy to crack down, this disdainful attitude towards freedom of expression serves at the very least to create an environment in which security officials feel that they face no consequences for harsh treatment of the press.

¶16. (C) Yet, while this backsliding in press freedom is disturbing, the GOM cannot put the genie back in the bottle. Unwilling and perhaps unable to truly crack down on the press, GOM efforts to protect the existing red lines are increasingly futile. Unless the GOM opts to take far more restrictive measures both to control access to satellite TV and Internet and to muzzle the local independent press) a highly unlikely prospect) its ham-handed efforts will have little tangible impact on freedom of expression in Morocco. Indeed, Ahmed Benchemsi, one of Morocco's most aggressive independent journalists, recently wrote that, after returning recently from an unprecedented (for a Moroccan journalist) trip to Algeria to report on conditions in the Polisario refugee camps in Tindouf, he was "pleasantly surprised that, once in Casablanca, we didn't have to respond to anyone's questions) neither at the airport nor for the whole week during which (the article) was being prepared." Benchemsi's experience is an important reminder that freedom of the press in Morocco may be battered, but it is far from broken. In any case, we will continue to make every effort to engage with our official contacts to promote the preservation and expansion of freedom of expression. End comment.

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